

DEMOCRACY OR ONE-PARTY SYSTEM

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Political Development in the Sudan

after the 2015 Election

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COVER PHOTO: Woman collecting water in Darfur, Sudan, by Leonard Tedd, DFID, UK Department for International Development, Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 2.0 Generic License

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Democracy or One-Party System

Political Development in the Sudan after the 2015 Election

In June, Al-Bashir, Sudan's leader since 1989, was sworn in for another five years as president. Few if any experts had expected any other outcome of the 2015 election. But will the 71 year old ex-military leader, who is accused by the ICC of war crimes in Darfur, continue his initiatives for national dialogue and overcome the country's major economic and security hurdles?

By Redie Bereketeab, Senior Researcher at the Nordic Africa Institute

Sudan held presidential and parliamentary elections on 13-15 April. The results of the presidential election confirmed the continuation in office of President Omar Hassan Al-Bashir for another five year term. This outcome was predictable in the absence of serious challengers, although there were about 16 lesser known candidates. The West declined

to send an observer team to monitor the election, but the African Union (AU), Arab League, Inter-Governmental Authority on Development (IGAD), Russia and China did send observers. The West was highly critical of the electoral process and outcome, while the Arab League, AU, IGAD, China and Russia were positive in their assessments. Even voter turnout was



PHOTO: AL JAZEERA ENGLISH, WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

Sudanese president Omar Al-Bashir arrives in Juba, capital of South Sudan, just after its independence in 2011. The 2015 Election was the first in Sudan since the secession of South Sudan.

contested. While the opposition put the turnout at as low as 30 per cent, the government claimed a more respectable 46 per cent. Al-Bashir was declared the winner, as expected, and was inaugurated on 2 June.

This is the first election since the secession of South Sudan in 2011 and the third since Bashir transformed himself into a civilian. The first election took place under the auspices of the CPA (Comprehensive Peace Agreement) in 2005. Does this third election herald consolidation of democracy or entrenchment of a one-party system? The electoral system allocates 30 per cent of seats to the opposition both in the legislature and in the cabinet. Based on this allocation, more than 100 seats in the legislature are occupied by the opposition, and the opposition is represented in the national government.

National Dialogue

In March 2014, President Al-Bashir called for a national dialogue that would encompass all political actors. Invitations were extended to the political opposition as well as armed rebels. The president spelled out five areas around which the national dialogue would revolve – identity, peace, democratisation, the constitution and the economy. After some uncertainties about what these issues meant, some political parties accepted the invitation to the national dialogue and began engaging with the government in the negotiations. However, the armed groups set conditions for their participation and continued to attack government forces. A committee consisting of seven members from the government and seven from the opposition – the 7 plus 7 formula – was struck to lead the national dialogue.

Serious divisions marred the project even before it could take off. One bone of contention related to an interim government and a new constitution: the opposition wanted both before the holding of national elections, while the government was not interested in forming an interim government, and held that a new constitution would only be possible following the elections. The opposition also demanded a neutral electoral commission. However, the government seemed prepared only to provide the opposition with certain posts in existing structures and was not ready to make profound changes. These sticking points proved so serious that the national dialogue failed and certain opposition parties opted for alternative strategies aimed at uniting the opposition and compelling the government to accede to their demands. The national Umma Party leader Al-Sadiq Al-Mahdi met with armed rebels



PHOTO: ROB BOGAERTS, ANEFO, WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

The national Umma Party leader Al-Sadiq Al-Mahdi is no green-horn in Sudanese politics. He was Prime Minister of Sudan from 1966 to 1967 and again from 1986 to 1989, when the Bashir Regime took power. Here we see him on a state visit in Haag in 1987, shaking hands with Dutch prime minister Lubbers.

in Paris and Addis Ababa and formed Sudan Call. Al-Mahdi was accused of conspiring with foreign forces and was declared persona non grata by the government. Even those parties that remained engaged in the national dialogue eventually lost faith in it and withdrew. The government went ahead with preparations for the election, which finally were arranged without the participation of the main political parties. The ruling National Congress Party (NCP) amended the constitution in the face of strong warnings by the opposition: the president was allowed to run for a third term and given sweeping powers to appoint, for instance, state governors.

Opposition Boycott and Divisions

When their demands were rejected, the main opposition parties decided to abandon the national dialogue and boycott the election. The opposition frequently adopts boycotts as a political means to delegitimise the government. At the same time, this strategy undermines their credibility and allows the NCP a free hand in shaping the political landscape. For this reason, many question the efficacy of boycotts as a delegitimation tool: they argue that this strategy rather ensures victory to the ruling party and president and creates division within opposition ranks. Thus, unlike in the 2010 election, President Omar Al-Bashir secured a sweeping victory with 94.5 per cent of the vote in this year's election. This decisive outcome could partly be explained by the boycott by the main opposition parties. It could also be explained by the fact that the traditional opposition seems to have lost its appeal among the younger

generation and misreads the reality on the ground. A profound structural and demographic change has taken place in Sudanese society over the years: the overwhelming majority, particularly the youth, have completely lost faith in the traditional political parties. Every time the opposition issues one of its recurrent, and hollow, announcements that it will mobilise the general population and depose the government within 100 days, it loses credibility.

The parallel national dialogue taking place outside the country has the effect of complicating the national dialogue process. There is a strong apprehension in Sudan about the involvement of the international community in its affairs. The secession of South Sudan tainted the reputation of international mediation in the North. It is not only the government that opposes the peace process taking place in Addis Ababa or Europe, but also the political opposition inside the country.

Economy and Security – Post-Election Hurdles

The two main hurdles the government faces are the economy and security. Following the secession of South Sudan, Sudan's economy suffered seriously. The overwhelming bulk of the oil was transferred to South Sudan, causing huge losses of oil-based income to Sudan. Economic growth plummeted, resulting

in high inflation, unemployment and recession. The construction of houses, infrastructure, schools, clinics, roads, etc. stopped, leading to further unemployment and economic hardship. Today, Sudan's economy is in need of comprehensive restructuring. The government has adopted some structural measures intended to stimulate economic growth. These include the abolition of subsidies on basic commodities, which provoked strong popular uprisings that were harshly suppressed. Ultimately, however, the measures seem to be having an effect in that the economy is slowly stabilising.

Furthermore, there is a growing realisation of the need to diversify the economy. This means reorientation from oil to other activities, two of which, gold and agriculture, are being given particular attention. The recent discovery and supply to the international market of gold seems to be gradually compensating for the loss of oil, and is allowing Sudan to refill its coffers. This has tempered inflation to a degree and ameliorated the economic hardship that followed the split. There is now also a realisation that it was a mistake to neglect agriculture and there now seems to be growing interest in revitalising it. The Gulf States have shown particular interest in funding agricultural projects.

Another challenge to the government of Omar Al-Bashir is security. The running conflicts in Darfur,



Oxfam workers constructing new latrines for families who have fled violence in conflict areas in Sudan.

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Bilateral relations of Sudan, the third largest country in Africa



CHINA is Sudan's biggest trade partner. Crude oil export earnings brought Sudan \$2.4 billion in 2014, according to the IMF. China is a major importer of oil from the Sudan.



RUSSIA is the major weapons supplier to the Sudan. In 2009 Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, SIPRI, reported that 87 percent of Sudanese arms are Russian.



USA imposed comprehensive sanctions against the Sudan in 1997. Later relations between the two countries have been strengthened and US sanctions were eased on parts of Sudan in 2009.



THE UNITED NATIONS has held sanctions against the Sudan for decades. An arms embargo was imposed after fighting broke out in the Sudanese region of Darfur in 2003.

South Kordofan and Blue Nile are diverting hard-earned resources into warfare. Resolving the conflicts in these three restive regions may decide the destiny of the ruling NCP. It has become clear to the government and the armed groups that there can be no military solution to the war, which neither side is capable of winning.

On the other hand, people seem to have lost interest in politics. Thus, if the government can fix the economy and bring peace and stability, then it has a chance to enhance its legitimacy. Someone expressed the situation this way: "If I am to choose between change-conflict-chaos on one hand, and stability under the current government on the other, I will choose the latter."

Grand Coalition

Now that Omar Al-Bashir has five more years to run the country, what happens to the national dialogue? Opposition groups are still insisting on a genuine dialogue, but they are in disarray, not only because of government repression but also because of internal weaknesses. The parties have failed miserably to unite. Indeed, they are multiplying by the day. Therefore, they are not capable of formulating an alternative political programme that could galvanise popular support. There is, in short, an asymmetry of strength. The weakness of the opposition parties means that they are increasingly reliant on external intermediaries such as the AU and EU to put pressure on the Bashir government. However, the government is allergic to external involvement and has adamantly refused to participate in a national dialogue held outside the country. An indication of the weakness of the opposition is that, instead of calling as usual for the deposal of the Bashir government, it is proposing an arrangement whereby

Bashir would remain president and a grand coalition of parties, including the ruling NCP, would lead the transition period. What is interesting about this proposal is that aging leaders such as Al-Sadiq Al-Mahdi (National Umma Party), Mohamed Osman Al-Mirghani (Democratic Unionist Party) and Hassan Al-Turabi (Popular Congress Party) would not be part of the grand coalition.

In his swearing-in ceremony, Bashir sounded a conciliatory note towards the opposition, including the armed opposition. He solemnly swore to turn over every stone to solve the problems of the nation. He also signalled his intention to improve relations with the West. There are those who believe his intentions may be genuine.

Sanctions

Sudan has been under UN sanctions for decades now. Since 2009, the International Criminal Court has also wanted to try President Bashir for alleged crimes in Darfur. Sanctions are a double-edged political instrument, playing into the hands of both government and opposition. While Bashir is tempted to stay in power at any cost in order to avoid surrendering to the ICC, the opposition is reluctant to engage in serious negotiations and compromises in the hope that sanctions and the indictment will compel the Bashir government to accede to their demands. Bashir is persistently on the alert against being handed-over to the ICC, particularly when he travels outside the country. The recent court incident in the South Africa is the latest inconvenience to beset the president.

Recently, however, there has been some movement towards the partial lifting of sanctions. Generally, there is immense frustration in Sudan with regard to

the sanctions. The Sudanese believe they have made considerable concessions to the West, including letting South Sudan secede and co-operating in the war against terrorism, yet the West, particularly the US, never reciprocates.

The current crisis in Yemen has provided Sudan with an opportunity: it immediately jumped on the bandwagon and joined the Saudi coalition against the Houthis. Omar Al-Bashir is quoted as describing the Yemen crisis as a gift from God. In addition to mending its relations with the Gulf States, particularly Saudi Arabia, Sudan has been able to strengthen its relations with the US. An indication of this is the visit by a US Coast Guard vessel to Port Sudan in May this year. There is also credible information about strong intelligence cooperation between the two countries.

Recommendations

- The state of the economy following the secession of South Sudan and the loss of oil revenue is the most challenging problem facing the government. Diversifi-

cation of the economy, especially in relation to agriculture, is therefore needed. Pervasive youth unemployment, one of the main sources of instability, needs to be addressed.

- Settling of the conflicts in Darfur, South Kordofan and Blue Nile is of decisive importance. The process of reconciliation should begin in earnest. Western involvement in mediation needs to be prudent, because external involvement in connection with South Sudan has tarnished the image of the West. The EU's active support for the opposition may backfire.

- Lifting sanctions would reinvigorate the economy. Sanctions not only hurt the economy by depriving it external investment, but also complicate the country's relations with the West.

- National dialogue needs to begin in earnest and should be taken seriously. Both government and opposition must have a realistic understanding of what national dialogue can and cannot achieve. Recognising the domestic nature of conflict resolution and peace-building is of paramount importance.



Sudanese market vendors.

PHOTO: USAID, PUBLIC DOMAIN

About the Author



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